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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses problems with high schools today, how public and private schools differ in their programs, and changes in high school curriculum. (Author/LD)

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STATEMENT

OF

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BEFORE

THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON ELEMENTARY, SECONDARY,

AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

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SECONDARY EDUCATION RETHOUGHT

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Introduction

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, I am Susan Abramowitz, an Associate with the Educational Policy and Organization Program of the National Institute of Education (NIE), the principal agency in the Federal government concerned with conducting educational research.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to testify before this Subcommittee during these oversight hearings on American secondary education and, specifically, to report on the results of an NIE study on public and private high school principals.[1] Three issues generated by this study should be of interest to the members of this Subcommittee as they consider future legislation in the area of secondary education: 1) how high schools are organized, 2) the differences between public and private high schools, and 3) how demographic trends in the eighties are likely to affect how well public schools can accomplish what we ask them to do.

Issues of Concern

NIE began its program of research on high schools conscious of the public debate about the ability of secondary education to meet the needs of America's youth. Charges were rampant that high schools had become too large and overly bureaucratic and were suffering from red tape, excessive rules, authoritarian teachers, and alienated students.[2] While we did not assess all of these charges,[3] we did examine the degree to which high schools are bureaucracies in the classic sense of the term.[4]

Second, interest in private schools has been growing. In part this interest in non-public education seems to be based on certain perceptions about the nature of both public and nonpublic education. Many assert that public education has lost touch with its clients, that educational efficiency and productivity are on the wane, and that the public school systems are becoming increasingly bureaucratized. Many of those who can afford it, and some who cannot, believe that private schools offer something special and claim that parents should have more choice over the education of their children.

High Schools Are Not Bureaucracies

If high schools could be characterized as bureaucratic, we would expect to find their management characterized by centralized decisionmaking, formal rules about how teachers should teach, and frequent formal evaluations. The results of our surveys suggest that the management style of most principals does not conform to this stereotype.[6]

We find decisionmaking highly participatory. Principals report involving their faculty and staff in many different kinds of decisions. Regulation by rule making tends to be confined to student and teacher non-instructional activities. Few rules touch the professional aspects of instruction. Furthermore, principals keep abreast of what teachers are doing through informal procedures, like meetings, rather than formal evaluation or classroom visits.

In the typical bureaucracy the day-to-day activities of the organization would be under the explicit and formal control of the principal. Our analyses suggest that the average principal, does not and often cannot act in this capacity. Teachers have one sphere of responsibility; principals another.

If principals do not influcence how teachers teach, what do they do? Principals are responsible for legitimating the school in the eyes of the community. Principals head an institution buffeted by a broad variety of inconsistent demands from different parts of their environment (e.g., different levels of government, parents, students, teachers, etc.) These demands are easier to satisfy in form than in substance. Faculty meetings are held, specialists hired, performance evaluations made, and standardized tests administered not so much to control instructional activity, but to prove to the community that the school is doing its job. The appropriate ritualistic response is important and can be action enough to alleviate the fears and allay the criticisms of the general public. This sort of response helps to insure financial support and maintain the good faith of the community toward the school.

This finding is important for policy for two reasons. First the way people view high schools determines their diagnosis of its 'ills' and the 'cures' they propose. Second, it suggests limits on what we can reasonably expect schools to change in response to new federal or state policies. The long history of education reform gone unimplemented is due in large part to a misunderstanding about schools.[7] Mandated change directed at schools is likely

to depend on the actions, performance, and interest of the high school principal. But community pressures, tenure, union agreements and the like all limit his ability to direct what goes on inside the classroom. Thus demands for change will take their place along with all the ongoing internal and external pressures which principals are required to balance, making the outcomes of reform uncertain and complicated. Federally initiated reform efforts, therefore, are most likely to succeed when they take into account the various competing pressures on the school.

Public and Private Schools Differ In Their Programs

The similarities between public and private school management we uncovered suggest the management styles of public and private schools are virtually the same,[8] but that the curriculum, program offerings, and clientele in public and private high schools differ greatly.

Public high school programs are diverse. The curriculum of most of the schools we surveyed was broad and suited to the needs of a varied clientele. In addition to having a core of academic courses -- English, math, sciences, and foreign languages -- public high schools provide students with a diversity of offerings from remedial reading and math to advanced placement; from work experience to community volunteer experiences.

Reference to Table 2 from High School '77 shown in the Appendix demonstrates that over half the high schools surveyed allow students to take college level

courses off campus, that over two-thirds offer work experience or occupational training, and that in over three-fourths some students take remedial English. Similarly Chart 1 in the Appendix indicates that at least 75 percent of the schools surveyed have a career information center and vocational education funding. As Chart 2 in the Appendix shows, grading and scheduling practices still appear quite traditional.

These findings suggest that past and recent observations that the environment of youth provides "little early contact with the world of work and little opportunity for organized service to others" are wrong.[9] American public high schools have been responsive to their critics and have expanded their mission in the last decade.

The private high school curriculum differs markedly from that of the public high school. While public schools provide a wide range of courses suitable for a diverse clientele, private schools offer a curriculum of academic subjects for less varied clientele whose demand for college preparatory subjects is fairly uniform. While the core curriculum is similar to that of public high schools, diversity is provided mostly through academically oriented alternatives. This different focus probably mirrors the tastes of the clientele private high schools serve. Private high schools are selective in their admission policy, and while racially, ethnically and often economically diverse, the students in the schools surveyed are more heavily drawn from the middle class than those attending the average public school.[10] It appears that while public schools are responsible for providing an equal educational opportunity to all regardless of race or class, private schools have a different mission focused mainly on academic excellence.[11]

The implications of these differences for those reassessing the public high school and examining its productivity are striking. In order to assess the output of the American high school, it seems to me that policy makers and researchers alike need to keep in mind what the mission of the high school has been and what it has become. Changing priorities and expanding responsibilities mark the development of the high school. The fifties ushered in the comprehensive high school while Sputnik heralded the overhaul of science instruction at the decade's end. As for the sixties, "relevance" was the watchword in response to civil unrest and the Vietnam War. It is quite likely that the pressures placed on the public high school are more diverse and demanding than those placed on the private high school. If the managers of private schools are seen as doing a better job it may not necessarily be because of the differences in their management techniques, but simply because their job is more manageable. Unless we take into consideration what pressures schools face and how they respond to them, we will not be fairly evaluating how well the high school succeeds at its various tasks. Thus when evaluating either public or private high schools we must look not only at "how well they are doing" but also at "what we require them to do."

Reassessment of the High School's Mission

A reassessment of the high school's mission is especially crucial as declining enrollments spread from elementary to secondary schools. It is unlikely that local revenues will rise to support the broadening mission of the high school. Rather it is far more likely that the public will expect to see expenditures decrease as the student population grows smaller. But even as demands to cut back accelerate, schools are still being asked to meet new needs, as mandated by various legislative

and judicial acts (e.g., Education for All Handicapped Children, Title IX, etc.)[12] In order to meet such needs, districts will have to find the necessary resources. If the rate of growth in education funds diminishes, trade-offs will have to be made and policy makers will need to consider which goals of the high school to retain and which to pare, which to emphasize and which to place on the back burner.

These decisions will not be easy and will have implications for the competitive posture of the public high school. Although the number of teenagers is decreasing, current indicators suggest that this decline will not affect private schools as much as their public school counterparts. Private education, like public education, has experienced declining enrollments.[13] But this overall decline has been due in large part to the decline in Catholic school enrollments, which account for approximately three-fourths of private school enrollments. The non-Catholic private education sector, however, has been increasing in size since 1968 and many schools have long waiting lines.

Private schools may become increasingly attractive to middle and upper middle income families if they believe that public education cannot provide their children with rigorous academic preparation. Many are beginning to feel that in the public high school's attempt to be socially responsive, it has sacrificed scholastic excellence. If the decline in the high school age population is exacerbated by a continued loss of faith in public education, the future of public secondary education could be bleak.

The mission of the high school needs to be reassessed in light of attempts to reduce local education expenditures. Changes in curriculum will be quite likely.[14]

But which courses should be cut? Advanced placement courses? Remedical courses? Community-based courses? Work experience? Fewer advanced courses means that perceptions of the high school as being unable to provide for the academically gifted student will be reinforced. Such perceptions may accelerate the exit of brighter or highly motivated students to private schools. Fewer remedial courses means that the poorer performing student will continue to slip by the wayside. Cutting out community-based education and work experience may also adversely affect a segment of the high school population.

High schools have been responsive, perhaps too responsive, to changes in curricular taste. The resultant curricular diversity has probably benefitted the poorer student most. Cutting courses may merely result in paring the curriculum suitable for one segment of the population only to replace it with courses appropriate to the more academically advantaged. A renewed focus on academic excellence through college preparation may increase the attractiveness of public education to those most likely to move (middle income) to the private sector, but at high cost to those students who need the rudiments.

Given finite resources, schools will have a hard time providing adequately for both ends of the spectrum. Thus, policymakers will have to examine carefully the short and long-term economic and social consequences of any such proposed curricular changes.

In conclusion, much of what the subcommittee hears in the remaining weeks will be fact mixed with opinion. Much testimony may assess the high school, find it

wanting, and recommend reforms. In order to anticipate the effects of these suggested reforms, we must begin with a realistic appraisal of what high schools can do and do well. If new programs are to succeed, they must take into account the manner in which high schools actually function.

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the opportunity to participate in today's hearings and will be pleased to respond to any questions you may have.

Footnotes

1 In 1977 the NIE together with the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the Council for American Private Education surveyed a national sample of public and private high schools. The sample consisted of 2000 public and 600 private high schools randomly selected from four regions of the country (East, South, Midwest, and West) and from 3 metropolitan status areas (urban, rural, and suburban). The response rate was 72 percent for the public high school principals and 75 percent for the private high school heads.

2 James S. Coleman, et al., Youth: Transition to Adulthood, Report of the Panel on Youth of the President's Science Advisory Committee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); John H. Martin, et al., National Panel on High School and Adolescent Education (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, March 1974); B. Frank Brown, et al., The Reform of Secondary Education: A Report to the Public and the Profession, National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education (New York: The McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1973).

3 NIE has sponsored further research in a selected group of the previously surveyed schools. This work, when completed, will allow us to compare how principals, teachers, and counselors perceive their schools and their work, and how various school characteristics-such as size, management, and location- relate to teacher and counselor attitudes and behaviors. In addition to these surveys we are also supporting case studies to capture a more indepth picture of high school programs, management, and students.

4 Traditional theory stems from the work of Max Weber, From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology (H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, trans.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958) and The Theory of Social and Economic Organization (A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons, trans.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947). Bureaucratic theory as it applies to schools is discussed in J.G. Anderson, Bureaucracy in Education (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968).

5 The National Center for Educational Statistics is now gathering private education data on an annual basis. The Congress, in its recently mandated study of School Finance, calls for a major sub-study of private schools and there have been numerous efforts at the Federal and state levels to enact tuition tax credit and voucher proposals.

6 These results are discussed at length in the NIE publications High School '77 and The Private High School Today (forthcoming).

7 See Terrence Deal, John W. Meyer, and Richard W. Scott, "Organizational Influences in Educational Innovation", in Managing Educational Organizations. Ed by J. Victor Baldridge and Terrence E. Deal (Berkeley: McCutcheon Publishing Co., 1975) and Peter Cowden and David K. Cohen, "Divergent Worlds of Practice: The Federal Reform of Local Schools in the Experimental Schools Program", (Cambridge: Huron Institute, 1979).

8 We did uncover some differences of consequence between how public and private schools are managed. Private high school heads appear to emphasize management objectives over the collegial and evaluative aspects of their role. They also report having more authority and influence in running their schools.

9 See "Summary of Concerns and Recommendations", Giving Youth a Better Chance, The Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education, 1979.

10 That private schools enroll pupils with higher income and more education than do public schools is confirmed by a recent report from the Census bureau. For example, private schools enroll less than 7 percent of families with annual incomes under $15,000, but over 18 percent of families with income over $15,000. Similarly, pupils with parents who are not college graduates are only half as likely to be in a nonpublic school as are pupils whose parents are college graduates. Moreover, all types of nonpublic schools enroll a much smaller fraction of minority students than do the public schools. And those minority students who are enrolled in nonpublic schools are even more heavily concentrated in the higher income (and college) graduate groups than are their white counter parts. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Report, Series P-20, No. 321 (1979)

11 The smaller size of private schools and the financial constraints under which they operate may also explain why the private high school curriculum is so focussed.

12 See Paul Hill, "Do Federal Education Programs Interfere with One Another?" P -6416 (Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation, 1979) for a discussion on the costs of federal programs.

13 Donald Erickson, "Recent Enrollment Trends in U.S. Nonpublic Schools", in Declining Enrollments: The Challenge of the Coming Decade, eds. Susan Abramowitz and Stuart Rosenfeld, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978).

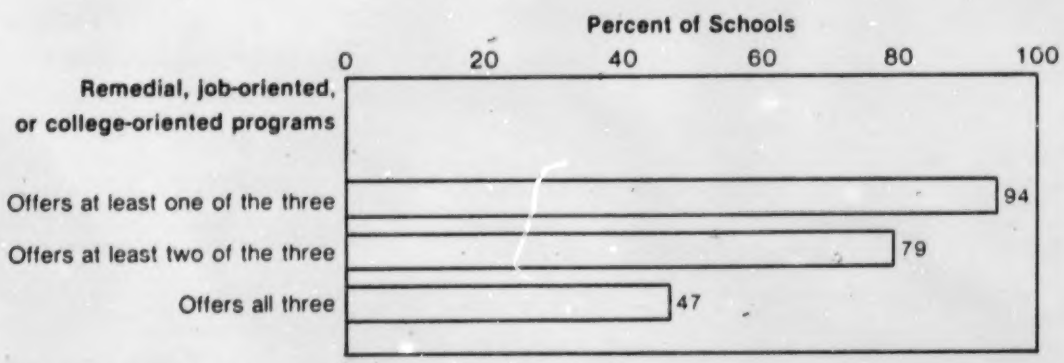
14 School districts can economize in a number of different areas: facilities, buildings, programs and staff.

APPENDIX

Table 2. Schools Offering Special Services

Service	Percentage of Schools Offering Service
College oriented	
Advanced placement	40%
College-level courses on college campus	53
College-level course at high school	19
Job related	
Work experience or occupational training	65
Job placement	36
Remedial: at least some students taking remedial work in—	
English	76
Mathematics	68

Figure 7
Three Types of Need-Based Programs



Source: NIE/NASSP survey, items 21 and 23

Chart 1. Features Most Schools Have

At Least 85 Percent of Schools	At Least 75 Percent of Schools	At Least 67 Percent of Schools
Traditional 35- to 60-minute periods		
	Career information center	Remedial reading or mathematics laboratories
Free or reduced price lunch funding	Vocational education funding; Special education funding	ESEA Title I funding; Transportation funding
Biology, chemistry, physics; Business education, homemaking, art, wood or machine shop; Sequential mathematics through grade 12; Full year of English required for all 10th and 11th graders	Sociology, anthropology, or psychology	French
	At least some 12th graders in off-campus programs part of the school week	At least 6 percent of all 12th graders and at least some 11th graders in off-campus programs part of the school week
	10 to 25 percent of 11th and 12th graders in some extracurricular activity	At least 25 percent of 11th and 12th graders in some extracurricular activity
	A-B-C-D-F grading system	

Chart 2. Features Few Schools Have

Fewer Than 15 Percent of Schools	Fewer Than 25 Percent of Schools	Fewer Than 33 Percent of Schools
Minicourses; Trimester system; Year-round schedule; Modules (10 to 30 minutes) Flexible or daily demand scheduling	Quarter system; Subunits or subschools; Block or departmental scheduling (2-hour periods or longer)	
	Voluntary summer school	
Childcare facility on campus	Occupational training center on campus	Instruction in flexible, open-space areas
Bilingual education funding; Funding for assistance to Indochinese refugee children; ESEA (desegregation) funding	State compensatory education funding	
Russian; Women's studies; Values clarification, moral education	Ethnic studies	Latin Environmental studies
Credit for travel experience; Credit from community volunteering	Credit by examination Credit by contract	
Diagnostic prescriptive education (DPE); Bilingual program	College-level courses given at high school; Early exit by examination (for diploma or equivalent); Individually paced learning; Dropout prevention program	
Pass-withdraw; Self-evaluation verification of competency; Weighted grading; Conferences	Numerical grading	